THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

DO NOT WORRY

November 22, 1998
John M. Buchanan

Thanksgiving Day! There is probably no day I like so much in the United States as this day. In many ways it struck me as a more spiritual or religious day than Christmas: no gifts, few commercial preparations, just a coming together to express gratitude for life and for all the blessings we have received. I am more and more convinced that gratitude is one of the most sublime of human emotions.

Henri Nouwen
Gracias!

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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DO NOT WORRY
NOVEMBER 22, 1998
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 65
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 12:22-31
". . . do not worry about your life . . . ."
Luke 12:22

Dear God, the busiest time of year is back again, and we can already feel the pace quickening out there, but also in here, in this building. We're starting to worry again about getting it all done. At the beginning of this week of Thanksgiving, O God, slow us down. Speak your word of love to us, help us focus on what is important and on what our dear ones truly need. Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts to your word through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The New York Times **recently reported that the average American is exposed to 3,500 commercial messages every day: all of them—billboards, magazines, newspapers, television, radio, even the sides of buses—saying the same thing: "You do not have enough." Keep working, harder and harder, so you can acquire more and more." "Do not worry . . . life is more than food . . . the body is more than clothing?" Not on Michigan Avenue, not in this season! (see Donald McCullough, "Say Please, Say Thank You" p. 19).**

Shopping has become the number one leisure time activity in America these days, no surprise to those of us who live and move and have our being in and around this amazing avenue and know about it first hand. I was interested to read recently about a new phenomenon, the shopping vacation. Pigeon Ford, Tennessee, where there are 250 factory and outlet stores in five malls, reports a sharp increase in vacation shoppers from all over the country. Phyllis Webb, a super-shopper, and quite an entrepreneur, spends all of her vacation shopping and conducts guided shopping tours of Pigeon Ford for groups of ten, sort of like a church pilgrimage to Geneva or Edinburgh or Rome. "We don't eat lunch," Phyllis warns. "You waste too much time." (*Can We Escape the Cycle of Work and Spend?*, Sandra Somers).

We live in a consumer culture. That is not news to anyone, and this is not a sermon about how awful and sinful that culture is. That is almost too easy. You've already heard that sermon many times. Nor is this a sermon about dropping out of the consumer culture, the rat race we love to lament and critique, but more than anything, actually love. There is plenty of support and there are plenty of resources for that. There are support groups to help you deal with your dependence on your job, your addiction to work. There are seminars to attend on how to downsize your appetite, your income, and your lifestyle, and there is a cottage industry of how-to, self-help books at Borders, if that is what you want to do:

Time Out: How to Take a Year Off;
How to Survive Without a Salary;
How to Get Off the Fast Track.

Of course, there is always the monastery, the convent, if voluntary poverty is your goal.

The profound influence of consumerism extends everywhere in our culture. This is not a brave and prophetic condemnation of materialism, but rather a modest attempt to explore what it means or might mean to live within this amazing culture as faithful followers of a man who one time said, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or wear. For life is more than food and the body is more than clothing." This sermon will suggest that we are called to do that—to live here intentionally but also faithfully, not to reject the world in which we actively live as sinful, but to explore how to live in it creatively and faithfully.

The distinguished social scientist C. Wright Mills taught a generation of us that once an economy has resolved the basic human needs for food and shelter it has to create more needs if it is to retain its energy and growth. Mills and others suggested that what the American economy created as a need in the 20th Century was "status" based no longer on birth, family, and class, but primarily on money. You get status in a consumer culture by earning and accumulating a lot of money so you can buy things, your "stuff," comedian George Carlin calls it.

The *New York Times Sunday Magazine* last week was, I thought, a classic. It had a lot of fun with the topic, "The State of Status." The issue explored status in 26 sub-cultures. The premise was that every sub-group in our culture, no matter how small, modest or esoteric, has its symbols and rituals that define rank and grant status.

> Status for Manhattan parents is "a kid who curls up with the classics," a ten-year-old who takes George Orwell's *1984* on vacation and actually reads it.
>
> For retirement villagers, status is a still-valid driver's license.
>
> Vegetarians acquire status by "eating it all raw." Simply eating nothing but veggies is not remarkable these days. Real vegetarians "eat it raw."
>
> My favorite was gourmet status, which goes to the person with "The coolest heat—a Viking Range," which the author described lovingly as "the Lamborghini Diablo of stoves, a sleek, stainless steel cooking vault with double roasting ovens, a gourmet glow infra-red broiler, and a cooktop fairly bristling with fire-breathing, 15,000 BTU mongo burners, which when you turn it on you get a cone of fire approximately the output of a space shuttle thruster."

In the lead article, journalist Andrew Sullivan wrote, "Status is inescapable. Even the hermit is posturing somewhere." And, to be sure, one of the 26 sub-cultures was clergy, Roman Catholic priests, to be precise. Those of us in the business know about this secret. The original idea behind the wearing of clergy garb and robes was to disguise worldly station or status. But there are commercial enterprises which want to sell clergy garb to us, and they know about marketing. So we have our own catalogs, with models and an array of clergy gowns with an amazing variety of colors and options. The *Times* essay suggested that priestly status is best expressed in cuff links, however.

> "The classic attire of a priest does not leave much room for personal expression," the author observes. Catholics are more challenged—we Protestants have ties, anyway. "Basic black is basic black." There isn't much room for variety in Roman

collars, pins look tacky on a priest. Shoes have limited usefulness as statements, because Jesus wore sandals, and Imelda Marcos gave shoes a bad name and the Philippines is a Catholic country. Cuff links are perfect. They can be fashioned from precious metal, even include little diamonds or the papal coat of arms."

The essay concludes, "Every neighborhood, profession, and sub-culture has its pecking order. That means lots of opportunities for prestige and anxiety."

"Do not worry about your life," Jesus told his friends one time. "Be not anxious," a better translation, I think, "life is more than food and clothing." Consider the birds, consider the lilies. Do not worry. Strive for God's kingdom and these things will be added to you."

It's either the silliest thing he ever said, or the most important, and it is, I think, at the very heart of his Gospel, the Good News which Jesus conveyed; the Good News which Jesus Christ himself is.

How can you believe such a thing? That God will provide if you stop worrying? "Consider the birds." Well, all right, let's consider the birds. I am an occasional bird watcher. And they work very hard. All day long, sun-up to sun-down, they are thinking always about food, shelter, security. If they don't, they die. I forget the exact figure, but an astonishingly high percentage of robins dies every year because they don't plan ahead. They sing on occasion, even on occasion for the sheer enjoyment of it, but mostly, I am told, the singing is functional—a warning, a flirtation, an invitation to romance or at least nest building, which is where romance leads. This is not an admonition to stop working hard.

Consider the lilies. Karl Marx hated this passage: "Opiate of the masses," he thought, to tell them God will take care of them. "Consider the lilies," said Marx, "Goat food, that's all." This is not an invitation to inactivity, hoping that someone else will take care of you.

"Do not worry?"

Frederick Buechner argues that to tell a person not to worry is like telling a person with a head cold not to sneeze. We worry. Many of us become expert at it—capable of worrying pretty much all the time, about our schedules, our appearances, our children, our health—about which we are capable of worrying that the worst that can happen will happen: the stomach distress is actually a terrible and terminal disease and the sudden headache is a brain tumor; our child is out too late, in a car accident, no doubt.

It helps to understand what prompted Jesus to say it. It was a man who asked him to resolve a family argument, the quintessential family feud over money. "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." There is no bitterness as bitter as the conflict which ensues over who gets what from the estate. Jesus doesn't touch it, but tells a story about a rich farmer whose barns will not hold all he has and so tears down the barns, builds bigger barns, fills them, and then makes a big mistake—says to his soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, be merry."

The man isn't bad. He has broken no laws, stolen no property, exploited no workers. His wealth is a result of good soil, seed, and favorable weather. He's had a good harvest—like

a long bull market. But he's a fool. He has nothing. His whole world, his whole conversation is bounded by the perimeters of his own ego. There's no one else. Just a man and his possessions, his stuff, his status—a fool.

"Do not worry about your life," he said to them and to us. "Life is more. Strive for God's kingdom, and all these things will be added to you."

It's about your center, your soul, that interior place where you are most who you are, where you establish your goals, the purpose and meaning of your life. We are made, you and I are, to have God and God's kingdom there. And when God is not there, when something else is there—success, influence, status, wealth—things are basically out of sync and nothing feels quite right. Nothing is enough. When you depend on wealth or status for your salvation, there is never enough.

That is what Jesus meant. That is why these words of his, so utterly contrary to the culture in which we live, haunt us so. That's why we can never quite forget them. "Do not worry about your life."

Think what we have done to ourselves. We've been lured into a work and spend cycle that is unlike anything the human race has ever produced. Since World War II, productivity in this country has tripled. At the same time the average American is spending about one-third more time at work. In the mid-19th Century, the average work week was 70 hours. By the early 20th Century, it had dropped to slightly more than 40 hours. Now, it's back up to 60. We're producing more, spending more, and working more to pay for it. We're even sleeping two hours less per night than people slept in the 1920s (see Sandra Somers, *Can We Escape the Cycle of Work and Spend?*).

When I first started studying this passage and arguing with it, I was irritated by it, resented it. How can anyone struggling to make ends meet on a modest salary provide food and clothing for a family, pay a mortgage, car payments, appliances, doctor bills and NOT worry, not be anxious, not think a lot about life and food and clothing and security? It seemed to me that you could follow Jesus or worry about life, but I was not much of a success at following and not worrying.

Gradually, I have understood. Something Dietrich Bonhoeffer said about the passage helps me. "The life of discipleship can only be maintained as long as nothing is allowed to come between Christ and ourselves. . . . This is not a moral law, a rule to be followed" Bonhoeffer wrote, "it is the Gospel of Christ." (*The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 159-161).

This is good news: that our accumulated wealth, our status, our influence do not save us. Something I think every one of us knows. Our salvation is in God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. Our truest and best and happiest life is in knowing that receiving the gift of God's love, being transformed by it and then slowly letting go of everything in which we have invested for our salvation, loosening our grip which, as a matter of fact, was beginning to crush whatever it is we are squeezing so hard, and our hands even aching along with our heart, loosening our grip and then beginning to share and give and love and live. And then I believe something wonderful and important begins to happen. When we stop striving and worrying and scrambling and hustling; when we stop, we begin, perhaps for the first time to see what we have—what God has given us: our lives, our dearest ones, our

friends, the beautiful world; to see, perhaps for the first time, how very much we have, how very much we have to be thankful for. "Don't worry." Be grateful is the Biblical rhythm. One of the best ways to be freed from an obsessive enslavement to wealth and goods and status, I am told, is to stop working so hard at it and start to be grateful, to say thank you.

Donald McCullough writes, "When we express gratitude, we experience, however fleeting and brief, a moment of contentment. When we say thank you, we heave a sigh of satisfaction in a world grasping. Instead of reaching out toward more, we pause to enjoy what we have." (*Say Please, Say Thank You*, p. 19).

Jesus did not promise that if we seek God's kingdom and regularly express our gratitude that we will be protected from suffering, sickness, or hunger, or death. It's more important than that.

Don McCullough tells about a prominent Baptist minister, John Claypool, who was utterly devastated by the loss of his ten-year-old daughter, Laura Lee, to leukemia. A few years later, he was able to write, "At least it makes things bearable when I remember that Laura Lee was a gift, pure and simple, something I neither earned nor deserved nor had a right to. And when I remember that the appropriate response to a gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude, then I am better able to try and thank God that I was given her in the first place. The way of gratitude does not alleviate the pain, but it somehow puts some light around this darkness and builds strength to begin to move on." (McCullough, p. 20).

That's why Jesus could say what he said. "Strive for God's kingdom and all these things will be given to you as well."

That's why the early church rejoices in the middle of persecution; it is why St. Paul urges, over and over, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." It's how Paul could write those words as their world was collapsing around them and their dear ones were being arrested and hauled off to execution. "Rejoice . . . Give Thanks."

It is why the early Christians startled their pagan neighbors by singing hymns of thanksgiving at their funerals.

It is why those brave and hearty souls, their numbers decimated by disease, hunger, and death, perched precariously on the edge of the North American wilderness, paused in the autumn of 1621 to give thanks to God.

"Do not worry about your life," he said. Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer and poet, takes a walk every Sunday morning, and then goes home and writes a poem. His mother died recently, and he wrote a poem which I think captures the good news that life is more than food or clothing, that when we know that and let go, God does give us everything we need. Wendell Berry wrote:

> "'You see,' my mother said, and laughed,
> knowing I knew the passage
> she was remembering,' finally you lose

everything.' She had lost
parents, husband, and friends, youth,
health, most comforts, many hopes.

Deaf, asleep in her chair, awakened
by a hand's touch, she would look up
and smile in welcome as quiet
as if she had seen us coming.

She watched, curious and affectionate,
the sparrows, titmice, and chickadees
she fed at her kitchen window—
where did they come from, where
did they go? No matter.
They came and went as freely as
in the time of her old age
her children came and went,
uncaptured, but fed.

And I, walking in the first spring
of her absence, know again
her inextinguishable delight:
the wild bluebells, the yellow
celandine, violets purple
and white, twinleaf, bloodroot,
larkspur, the rue anemone
light, light under the big trees,
and overhead the redbud blooming,
the redbird singing,
the oak leaves like flowers still
unfolding, and the blue sky."

"A Timbered Choir"
The Sabbath Poems
1979-1997
1997-IV

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. Strive for God's kingdom and these things will be given to you as well."

Trust that.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.